

*Harold R. W. Morrison*

## **The Parade Square**

Reveille. After the trumpeting came groans, yawns and curses from a barracks-room of men awakening.

I turned and saw them dressing in the Khaki uniform of 1914. Christ, the things those self-improvement people would do for special effects. Absurd, absurd. I was a passed-over man in his late 30s who had shelled out \$3,000 for a personality change.

“Harry, hurry, wake up.”

I stared into an intense, youthful face. An out-of-work actor no doubt.

“To hell with it.”

I swung my feet over the edge of the cot.

A voice of thunder echoed from the barracks-room door.

“Move! Or it’s the defaulters’ parade for you!”

I found myself stepping into rough serge breeches which knotted in shoe-lace string just below the knee. Puttees – cloth bindings – were worn from ankle to knee. My unknown friend made my bed. I was having the damndest time rolling up the puttees. After lacerating myself with a dull blade, I came running out of the barracks and took my place in the last rank.

“Sleeping Beauty has awakened!” cracked the sergeant. “You do that in Europe m’lad and the Hun will wake you up with a bayonet in the chest.

“Platoon, atten-shun!

“Move to the right in columns of three, ryat-turn! By the lay-left, qui-ick march!”

It’s a game. Play the game, I mused. But 1914?

The sergeant’s voice blasted in my ear.

“Arms up shoulder high!”

A corporal with a near falsetto voice shrieked, “Lay-eft ryat, Lay-eft ryat.”

I fell out of step and someone tramped on the backs of my boots.

“Platoon. Halt! Platoon will break off for breakfast at the command, dismiss. Dismiss!”

We broke ranks and shuffled into a newly-made frame building. Breakfast was scalding hot coffee, cold toast and bowls of thick gloppy porridge.

I listened to what the other men were talking about. They were talking about the Germans being stopped at the Marne, about the United States staying out of the war and maybe even going in on the Germans’ side.

“They’ve got a helluva lot of Germans down there,” someone said.

I shouted: “Listen to me! The Yanks joined the war in 1917 on our side. The Germans lost. There was a Second World War. The Germans lost that one too —”

“Shuddup asshole!” someone shouted.

“Boozed it up last night.”

“Funny old Harry. Last night he told us men were going to fly to the moon.”

Raucous table-thumping laughter.

“I know all of this is part of a self-improvement course,” I shouted.

“Goddamn right,” said a red-faced farmboy, “you don’t improve yourself and you’ll get killed.”

I scraped my cleated heel on the oiled floor. I looked at the white dishes, the plain cutlery and none of it bore the mark of 1974. The calendar said 1914.

I had signed a release form which waived any legal claim against the Alpha Foundation. Part of my problem has been a search in life for someone who would help me. Anytime I’ve had problems, I’ve always thought that My Protector wouldn’t let this happen to me. But one day, staring out my office window, it hit me. I was through. Passed over. I used to think in university days that by the time I was thirty-five I would have the world in my pocket. Successful novelist, professor of literature, poof! In reality, I started off in newspaper work, switched to corporate public relations — temporary work, I always thought — until the bomb went off and I found myself clambering out of the ruins. I

wasn't going to be published. I wasn't going to be a success. I was going to be, at best, a second-rank public relations man.

I went through all the "if only" escapes. If only I was wealthy. If only I had relatives or friends in high places. Any thoughts I had could be summed up better by other writers. I felt myself to be inauthentic, a cliché in my own time, my best witticisms at my expense.

Seeking out new jobs was frustrating. It's tough to explain the ten-thousand dollar gap between the job you have — and the one you want. The old boy network again. My discovery of advertisements for jobs which had already been filled. If only...

The offers that never came...the rejections that always did.

One day, I made an application at what I thought was an executive placement agency. (Oh that word. Executive lunches, executive boxer shorts, executive jets and executive rub-downs.)

I was given a brochure on the Alpha Corporation and was instructed to read it. I know all the horse-shit about interviews. Dress like you're on parade; be immaculate in your personal grooming, shoes blindingly shined, razor creases in your suit, shirt new out of the box, tie subdued but stylish. Let the interviewer open the door. Let him sit down first and ask you to be seated, or if he doesn't ask, sit down yourself and don't look like a dummy.

Play a controlled game in the interview. Take control at some point, but relinquish it. I'm so smart I make myself sick; but next week, I've got to get organized.

J.E. Cranston, silver-maned managerial aristocrat, approached me.

"Ready for the interview."

"There's no point to the interview."

"No point?" he said in a mock British put-down style I've seen so often on the late evening movie.

"I'm interested in a job — (I wish I hadn't used that word) — and your brochure says you don't make job offers."

"So it does. Could we chat over coffee?"

Smooth-talking son-of-a-bitch, suckered me right in.

Over coffee, "Do you mind if I call you Harold?"

"My friends call me Harry —" Verbal ping-pong. An overhand smash he couldn't return.

"Harry, do you consider yourself a success?"

"No."

Beaten. That's my game. Victim. The man reading a letter of rejection for a novel or a high-ranking office. My sweatshirt bears the motto, If only...

"Where do you think God is —?"

Anything, but a religious freak. Dare To Be Great or the Blake course, but not a religious freak. Am I going to wind up on a streetcorner shouting Hare Krishna to the beat of finger cymbals?

"Think of the greatest achievements of men over the centuries. We started out as animals...but now, we are gods, all of us. Only most of us are inhibited by a view of ourselves held up by others. We have been defined and redefined by the intellectual fascism of our society. Think of yourself as Gulliver tied down by the Lilliputians..."

So it wasn't my fault after all. It was *their* fault. I liked that better. If it weren't for THEM, the little people always blocking my way.

The game I played started over again. Cranston was going to be the man who would help me. Then, the crunch, \$3,000. Inflation. Stagflation. It was still a lot of money for a five-day course.

I paid.

On schedule, I checked into the Capreol Motor Hotel, had supper with the usual look-alike crowd one finds in high quality motor hotels and went to my room. Watched television. Had a shower. Then slept. Until now.

I know my problem. All my life, I have been willing to play games. But perhaps that's what THEY wanted.

We piled out of the mess-hall, formed up and marched back to our barracks. I wanted to grab someone and talk, but everyone was furiously gearing up with haversacks, bayonets, canteens, ammunition pouches and entrenching tools. Soldiers were buffing their boots, fussing with hat badges or smoothing down puttees.

A joke. A bad joke. I felt something at my neck. It was a circular aluminium tag bearing the number 453761, 58 C E F\* PTE H MORRISON. I planned to keep this as a souvenir.

Again, I was last on parade.

The sergeant bawled out, "Pla-toon, open order march! Front rank, two paces for-ward! Rear rank two paces back-ward! March!" My cadet corps experience was coming back to me.

A new character appeared, the Regimental Sergeant-Major who looked like a left-over from Pontius Pilate's bodyguard. Trailed by the

\* 58th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force

sergeant and corporal, he inspected the men.

"Am I hurting you?" he barked at one soldier.

"No sergeant-major."

"I should be. I'm standing on your hair."

A rifle clattered to the ground.

"Soldier, when your rifle falls, fall with it! Take that man's name down."

The corporal scribbled furiously.

Someone snickered.

"Who laughed?" Silence. "I'll double-march this platoon until everyone drops. Who laughed?" A weak piping voice, "I did, sergeant-major."

"Take that man's name down!"

As the corporal wrote down the defaulter's name, I thought of a bad movie in which a boy kept repeating, Dad's gonna whip you so bad...

My turn. I was looking at the peak of the Regimental Sergeant-Major's head-dress, but I knew he was looking into my eyes.

"Cap badge. Tarnished. Brass. Misty. Uniform. Baggy. Equipment. Dirty. Boots. Dusty. Rifle barrel. Festering. You load of filth!"

Game or not, the hairs on the back of my neck snapped to attention. My face reddened and I could feel my knees go shaky as they did when I was a boy getting into a fight, usually with someone tougher than me.

"You can't say that to me!"

"I — can't — say — that — to — you — I just did. I am going to teach you respect. It might save your life someday."

"Private Morrison, atten-shun.

"Port arms!"

I snapped my rifle across my chest in the port arms position.

"Two paces backwards, march!"

"Left turn. You will now commence to double around the parade square. By the right, double march!"

Once around the parade square. Twice. What the hell was I playing his game for?

I stopped.

"Who told you to stop? Double march!"

Instantly, I started again. The muscles in the calves of my legs screamed. My spine felt twisted by the heavy pack. The long bayonet and scabbard banged against my leg.

I could see the platoon carrying on with rifle drill as I doubled about that vast parade square, about the size of a football field.

I felt hot tears on my face from rage at the situation and hatred of myself for playing along. Then, I stumbled and fell heavily. Both my hands were lacerated and stung with dozens of fine cinders which were embedded in the flesh. My top inner front lip bled.

Still on the parade square, I found myself reflected in the gleaming boots of the Regimental Sergeant-Major.

“To your feet! One of your puttees is undone. Do it up!”

Dumbly, I did it up.

“Double!” bellowed the Regimental Sergeant-Major.

By reflex, I started, then I stopped.

“I’m not playing anymore,” I said.

I undid my belt and equipment straps, letting everything fall to the parade square. I threw down my cap.

“Sergeant! Corporal! Arrest this man.”

They came running. I took off.

I remembered that I was in Northern Ontario. That *must* be true. When I found the highway I dreaded the sight of the first car. What if it were a 1914 model – complete with military police? I was happy to be passed by a 1974 model, happier to get a lift directly to the Capreol Motor Hotel.

Alternately, my mood swung between laughter and rage. Yes, all my life I had been playing games, their games. The message was true. All I had to do was to stop playing. And then what would happen? I didn’t know, but guessed that my own life would begin. I packed my clothes and checked out.

The desk clerk was incredulous – or a good actor.

“Checking out so soon? The first seminar isn’t over yet...”

“Stop it!” I shouted. “I know it’s a game.”

Settling down in the seat of a DC-9, my swing mood continued. The games were over and I felt light-headed. Casually looking out the window, I saw a flight of triple-wing Fokker aircraft sweeping in on a formation of Sopwith Camels.